

**IL 10-98-012**

In Reply Refer To:

**June 5, 1998**

**UNDER SECRETARY FOR HEALTH'S INFORMATION LETTER**

**CARDIAC SURGERY PERFORMED WITHOUT THE USE OF BLOOD  
TRANSFUSIONS OR BLOOD PRODUCTS**

1. This Information Letter provides new guidance for provision of cardiac surgery to veterans who for religious or other reasons refuse to accept whole blood transfusions or blood products.
2. Some veterans hold religious beliefs, which preclude their acceptance of whole blood and, sometimes, other blood products. Many, though not all, of these veterans are members of Jehovah's Witnesses. That faith group has local hospital liaison committees in many communities and a national office eager to be of assistance to patients and staff when issues arise regarding the use of blood or blood products. **NOTE:** *To contact the Hospital Liaison Committee for Jehovah's Witnesses in your area, call their Hospital Information Services (HIS) at (718) 625-3600 from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., eastern time. In an emergency, you may call (718) 624-8100. HIS will provide names of Hospital Liaison Committee members nearest any VA facility. Committee members will be able to offer assistance and provide information regarding possible treatment strategies and provide information acceptable to members of the Jehovah's Witnesses faith group.*
3. Advances in technology in recent years have helped reduce the need for transfusions and treatment with blood products in many complex surgical interventions. Indeed, the medical community as a whole supports minimizing the need for and use of blood for a number of clinical and economic reasons. Many surgeons feel it inappropriate or even unethical to engage in certain surgical procedures without blood and its products being available if required during the operation. Other surgeons find it equally troubling to refuse surgery to patients whose faith or conviction requires them to refuse transfusions. Problems arise primarily in the context of possible cardiac surgery.
4. The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) respects the moral and ethical positions of both its patients and its staff. VHA supports patients' absolute right to refuse consenting to surgery in which blood or blood products might be used; and VHA supports surgeons who believe they cannot undertake surgery under restrictions of this type.
5. In July 1996, the Surgical Section of the Acute Care Strategic Healthcare Group conducted a survey of VHA cardiac surgery programs and identified a number of programs and, in some instances, individual cardiac surgeons willing to assess individual cases and at least consider

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undertaking clinically indicated cardiac surgery without the use of blood or blood products. Attachment A lists those programs and individuals responding affirmatively. Some, as noted, restrict the types of cases or have specific treatment protocols for patients they will evaluate.

6. If a veteran candidate for cardiac surgery is unwilling to accept transfusions and is seen at a VHA facility where the usual cardiac surgeons cannot accept this limitation, the veteran should be offered referral to an appropriate surgeon or program from Attachment A. It is understood that there may be clinical situations where even listed referral surgeons believe surgery under such restrictions is not acceptable. Under those circumstances, the veteran will be fully advised of VHA's assessment and offered whatever other treatments are medically indicated and, in the view of the VA physician(s), appropriate.

7. In elective cases, clinicians should consider use of erythropoietin in the preoperative weeks to reduce the need for blood or blood products. VHA Guidelines for the Use of Recombinant Human Erythropoietin (r-HuEOP) state "HuEPO may be included in clinical strategies when a patient steadfastly refuses to allow blood transfusions." The use of HuEPO needs to be considered to reduce the need for blood transfusions, to enhance preoperative autologous blood donations and in blood conservation programs.

8. It is essential that each patient be fully counseled regarding the risks of not having blood and blood products available and that this counseling and the patient's decision be specifically documented both in the progress notes and on the informed consent form before undertaking such surgery. Such counseling should address the increased risks of mortality and of complications and other morbidity, to the extent known.

9. The Surgical Section in VHA Headquarters will re-survey the field and update this list as needed. The list will be distributed to the network Clinical Managers and the Chiefs of Surgery. VHA Headquarters surgical section, Acute Care Strategic Healthcare Group, will assist in the referral process upon request.

10. Questions regarding this information letter may be referred to VHA Surgical Service at (202) 273-8505.

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Under Secretary for Health

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**ATTACHMENT A**

**JULY 1996 SURVEY**

The following Medical Centers evaluated patients for cardiac surgery who refused the use of blood or blood products with the restrictions noted:

<b><u>STATION and SURGEONS(s)</u></b>	<b><u>RESTRICTIONS(s)</u></b>
<b>ALBUQUERQUE, NM</b> George Wernly, M.D. Fabrizio Follis, M.D. Stuart Peti, M.D.	None
<b>ASHEVILLE, NC</b> F. Maxton Mauney, Jr., M.D.	Reserves the Right to Accept Patients on a Case by Case Basis
<b>BIRMINGHAM, AL</b> William Holman, M.D.	Reserves the Right to Accept Patients on a Case by Case Basis
<b>BROCKTON/WEST ROXBURY, MA</b> No Specific Doctors	Reserves the Right to Accept Patients on a Case by Case Basis
<b>BUFFALO, NY</b> Leon Levinsky, M.D.	Reserves the Right to Accept Patients on a Case by Case Basis
<b>CHARLESTON, SC</b>	Rerserves the Right to Reject Patients of Unacceptable Risk (Decided on a Case-by-Case Basis)
<b>CLEVELAND, OH</b> Diana Whittlesey, M.D. Brian Cmolik, M.D.	No Redo Cardiac Surgery
<b>COLUMBIA, MO</b>	Reserves the Right to Accept Patients on a Case by Case Basis, Based on Hematocrit, and other restrictions
<b>DECATUR (ATLANTA), GA</b> Robert Lee, M.D. David Vega, M.D.	None

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**STATION and SURGEONS(s)**

**RESTRICTIONS(s)**

**HINES, IL**

Vassyl Lonchyna, M.D,  
Joseph M. Arcidi, M.D.

None

**HOUSTON, TX**

James W. Jones, M.D.

None

**MADISON, WI**

Charles Canver, M.D.  
Robert Love, M.D.

First Time Bypass Procedures Only  
(Probably No Redo or Remedical  
Procedures)

**MIAMI, FL**

Kenneth Herskowitz, M.D.

None

**OKLAHOMA CITY, OK**

No Specific Physicians

Elective Only, with Trazylol on  
Hand

**PALO ALTO, CA**

No Specific Physicians

Reserves the Right to Accept  
Patients on a Case by Case Basis

**PORLAND, OR**

Pasula Ravichandran, M.D.  
Hagop Hovaguimian, M.D.  
Storm Floten, M.D.  
Anthony Furnary, M.D.  
Aflab Ahmad, M.D.

None

**SAN DIEGO, CA**

Riyad Tarazi, M.D.

None

**RICHMOND, VA**

Andrew S. Wechsler, M.D.  
David R. Salter, M.D.

Elective Only

**TAMPA, FL**

No Specific Physicians

None

**WEST HAVEN, CT**

No Specific Physicians

Two-Week Preoperative Course of  
Epogen And Iron

**WEST LOS ANGELES, CA**

No Specific Physicians

None